

Literacy Advocates Rally Against NYC Budget Cuts

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By Maya Miller and Latima Stephens

As the budget dance enters its final steps, advocates still have some moves left for Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

At least 200 adult literacy advocates congregated at City Hall Park today to protest cuts to at least three education programs. Joined by Comptroller John Liu as well as Council members Gale Brewer, Sara Gonzalez and Matthieu Eugene, those in attendance said they are in it for the long haul.

“It’s a fight every year to get the City Council and the mayor to work together to put funding back in the budget,” said Sierra Stoneman-Bell, co-director of the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition.

The most recent budget put forth by the Bloomberg administration would cut approximately \$7 million from the adult literacy programs. As a result, the cuts would eliminate 7,000 seats saved for helping New Yorkers learn English, which those at the protest said is vital to their and their families' livelihoods.

“We need to speak more English to help our children with their homework and to get a better job,” Maria Beroa, 35, said.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Beroa now lives in Brooklyn and takes English as a Second Language classes at Borough of Manhattan Community College.

“Maybe if they see the people here they will know we truly need the program,” she added.

The programs at risk include: the Department of Youth and Community Development’s adult literacy program, which teaches adults the reading and writing skills to get a job; the Adult Literacy Services Initiative, which offer programs in basic education and English as a second language; and the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative, which provides affordable legal services and English classes to immigrant communities.

The Bloomberg administration and the Council have until June 30 to finalize the 2014 budget.

Liu, whose People’s Budget project ranked adult literacy as the number one budget priority, expressed his support for the restoration of money to the programs, especially those that cater to immigrant communities.

“This is a city that if you come here, you work hard, you dream big and then you work a little harder, you can achieve great success,” said Liu, also a Democratic mayoral hopeful. “But not if they cut off the funding. Not if they don’t allow our people to get the education they need.”

Amy Mereson, director of Youth Education and Arts Programs at University Settlement, echoed Liu’s call for comprehensive support for education.

Things are moving in the wrong direction,” Mereson said before criticizing Bloomberg’s record. “The ‘education mayor’ cannot limit his definition of education to young children. The city is full of immigrants where English is a requisite to jobs. It is a necessity.”

Those in attendance said that they are more than familiar with the budget dance, this being the third year of budget cuts to adult literacy programs in New York.

Mae Dick, 62, retired last year after having spent over 40 years in the adult education field and said she has seen it happen again and again.

"I've been in this field forever. We're here every year," Mae said, "and we always have to fight."

Photo by Latima Stephens/Gotham Gazette.

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